

CONSERVATION (PART I)

PROTECTING WORKING FARMS AND RANCHES AND
 THEIR ASSOCIATED HABITATS

The Conservation title of the Farm Bill is the most significant source of federal funds for the stewardship of our nation's private lands. Programs in the Conservation title protect working farm and ranch lands and assist farmers in undertaking environmental enhancements such as wetlands restoration. Communities from every corner of California – from agricultural, urban, and suburban districts – are interested in this Farm Bill because of the stewardship opportunities it provides.

Eighty-five thousand acres of farm and range land in California are lost each year to development. Among those acres are tens of thousands of acres of the best farmland in the world and rangelands that are the backbone of rural economies. These lands also provide scenic vistas and vital wildlife habitats. The pressures on these working lands are increasing as California's population is projected to grow from 37 million today to 60 million in 2050.

Despite tremendous needs, more than two thirds of the farmers in California who apply under the conservation programs are turned away due to lack of funds. The Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP), which protects rangeland from sprawl, has a waiting list that would require some \$72 million to fill. California has met a portion of this need by working with ranchers to conserve some 151,000 acres of rangeland; a renewed federal commitment to this program is essential to protect the state's threatened rangelands.



Separately, more than 40,000 acres of farmland have been protected from loss to development by the federal Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP) in tandem with the state's farmland conservancy program over the last 10 years. Unfortunately, this amount represents little more than the *annual* loss of prime farmland in the state. California has invested three dollars to each

federal farmland protection dollar, and in a typical year is \$12 million short of the immediate demand. A significant influx of federal funding is required to leverage the state's investment.

Conservation title programs underwrite landowners' voluntary habitat restoration activities that benefit all Californians. The Wetlands

Reserve Program (WRP) has helped landowners restore nearly 100,000 acres of wetlands from marginal and flood-prone agricultural lands in California. In the Central Valley, where more than 95% of the native wetlands have been lost, WRP's enhancements have been critical to maintaining and enhancing waterfowl populations, providing habitat for shorebirds and for other wetland dependent species. In 2006, the unmet needs under WRP totaled some \$45 million according to NRCS.

California needs a Farm Bill that will provide the tools to support farmers and ranchers who voluntarily opt to conserve their working farm and ranch land and restore natural habitats. The benefits they provide accrue to all Californians.

California Supports:

- Reauthorizing and funding the Grassland Reserve Program at 5 million acres.
- Reauthorizing and funding the Wetland Reserve Program at 3.775 million acres.
- Increasing spending on the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program to \$300 million annually.